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ABSTRACT

This guide to alcohol and other drug abuse prevention for individuals with mental illness notes the incidence of mental illness and types of conditions. The incidence of alcohol and other drug abuse problems in this population is discussed, emphasizing the difficulty in dealing with the dual problem of substance abuse and chronic mental illness. The leaflet points out that prevention efforts should include information specific to the person's disability. It offers suggestions to improve interactions with this population and provides factual information to dispel four commonly held myths about individuals with mental illness. Seven organizational resources and seven printed resources are listed for further information. (JDD)

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# A Look at Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse Prevention and...
# MENTAL ILLNESS

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Mental illness is a commonly occurring disability in the United States. Perhaps one-third of the population will experience a mental disorder at one time in their lives (Reiger et al., 1988). It is very difficult to determine the number of people with mental illness due to the nature of definitions. Mental illness often is considered a separate category from other disabilities, and this also confuses estimates of prevalence (NIDRR, 1989).

Two of the most common conditions are anxiety disorders and depression. There are different types of anxiety disorders, including:

- generalized anxiety disorder;
- panic disorder;
- post-traumatic stress disorder;
- obsessive compulsive disorder; and
- social and other phobias.

Approximately one American in twenty will suffer at least one major depressive disorder in his or her life. Depressive illnesses include:

- major depression;
- dysthymic disorder;
- atypical depression; and
- manic depression.

Among the more severe forms of mental illness is schizophrenia. It is estimated that one percent of the population is schizophrenic. Unfortunately, only one half of these people are treated for the condition (Smith, 1989). Although mental illness is not considered a physically restricting condition, it is ranked ninth out of 67 chronic health conditions for causing activity limitation (LaPlante, 1989). Mental illness is included in the definition of disability in Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA).

## The Implications of Alcohol and Other Drug Use

Recurring alcohol and other drug abuse problems affect perhaps 50% or more of all people with mental health disabilities (Brown, et al., 1989). When this occurs, a vicious cycle is established—the abuse degrades the person's mental health, which only increases the problems with alcohol and other drug abuse. Confounding the issue of diagnosis, the symptoms of alcohol and other drug dependency are sometimes very similar to those of depressive or anxiety disorders.

The dual problem of alcohol and other drug abuse and chronic mental illness is particularly difficult and challenging to address in treatment settings. The issues related to the mentally ill chemical abuser are a major concern for health and mental health systems for this reason. There has been more interest in this area of disability and alcohol and other drug abuse than in any other to date.

People with serious mental health problems generally do not function well in traditional

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alcohol and other drug dependency treatment settings. Denial of the mental illness is as common as the denial of alcohol and other drug abuse problems. Self-help support groups are one potential source of sobriety, especially if the groups are specialized for people with mental illness.

**A Resource:** To explore the issues related to the alcohol and other drug dependency treatment, obtain a copy of *Dual Disorders: Counseling Clients with Chemical Dependency and Mental Illness*, written by D. Daley, H. Moss and F. Campbell, 1987. The book is available from Hazeldon, Box 176, Center City, MN 55012.

Alcohol and other drug abuse prevention efforts should include information specific to the person's disability. For example, the following points might be emphasized in discussions with a person who has a mental illness:

- Many people with mental illness receive medication on a regular basis, and these drugs can include some with habit-forming properties or potentials for abuse. Anti-anxiety medications in particular are very addictive, and they are dangerous when mixed with alcohol.
- The depressant effects of alcohol and other drugs are not helpful if proneness to major reactive episodes are common for the person with mental illness.
- There is a difference between taking medication and using alcohol and other drugs to deal with emotions and difficult situations. It is important to learn effective ways to deal with stress and other problems and not use alcohol and other drugs to do so.

## Suggestions to Improve Positive Interactions

**Learn more about the nature of the person's diagnosed mental illness.** If the person is prescribed medication for his or her illness, locate information on the side effects and long-term health impact.

**Remember that people with mental health problems generally do not have lower intelligence.** Some people may have difficulties with attention span or discussion topics that produce anxiety, but other communication problems should be minimal.

**Be aware that people with more severe mental illness have difficulty dealing with emotions or expressing them.** A person may smile even when he or she is angry or afraid.

**Some people with mental health problems tend to overreact to emotionally-charged topics or conversations**. When this occurs, it is more likely that miscommunications will result. Important information should be conveyed in an objective manner, unless you know how the person is likely to react.

**Positive reinforcement and encouragement are very important** tools for change for a person with mental illness. These principles should be incorporated into conversations and activities.

**REMEMBER**

*ASK AND LISTEN!*

A person with
a disability
is the expert
about his or her
disability.

# MYTHS & **FACTS**

MYTH: *People with mental illness are mentally retarded.*

**FACT:** Most people with mental illness are average or above average in intelligence. During adjustment periods to medications, a person may appear lethargic. The medications do not affect intelligence.

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MYTH: *People with mental illness are violent and dangerous.*

**FACT:** Although some mental health diagnoses include symptoms of aggressive behavior, people with mental illness are no more violent than the norm.

MYTH: *People with mental illness never get better.*

**FACT:** Most people with mental illness show improvement over time in their diagnosed condition. Some conditions, such as schizophrenia, usually are permanent; however, self-help groups, medication, case management, and psychotherapy can improve a person's quality of life and functioning level.

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MYTH: *People with mental illness bring it on themselves.*

**FACT:** Numerous research studies have shown that mental illness consists of bio-psycho-social conditions that are created by multiple factors. Some mental illnesses tend to recur in the same family.

# ETC.

This space has been provided for you. Make notes or write questions that you want to ask resource organizations or agencies.

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# *For More* INFORMATION

## Organizations

American Psychiatric Association
1400 K Street, NW
Washington, DC 20005
(202) 682-6000

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill
2101 Wilson Blvd, Suite 302
Arlington, VA 22201
(703) 524-7600

National Mental Health Association
1021 Prince Street
Alexandria, VA 22314
(703) 684-7722

## Government Agencies

Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration
5600 Fishers Lane, Rockville, MD 20857
(301) 443-3783

National Institute of Mental Health
5600 Fishers Lane, Rockville, MD 20857
(301) 443-3673

## Community Contacts

To locate additional resources contact your state Governor's Committee of People with Disabilities

or obtain a State Resource Sheet from

National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities
PO Box 1492, Washington, DC 20013
(703) 893-6061 • (800) 999-5599 • (703) 893-8614 TDD

## References

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This information was developed as a part of a set of materials on alcohol and other drug abuse prevention and disability. Other documents on specific topics are available upon request.
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